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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the use of tag questions in the private conversations of Swedish men and women. Conversations took place in single-gender dyads (six with two men and six with two women) and six mixed-gender dyads. Informants were aged approximately 25 or approximately 50, of different social classes, chosen by random selection, and asked to engage in a conversation with a friend or relative. In this corpus, 350 of the 7,785 conversational turns, or 4.5%, ended with some kind of tag. The syntactic qualities, functions, and gender differences of the use of two tag questions, "va" ("OK? Right?) and "vet du" ("You know"), were examined. It is concluded that the two tag questions have different functions in conversation and are used in different conversational strategies, and that their usage can never be explained out of context. It is argued that a single variable such as tag question use can not be seen in isolation as an explanation of gender differences in language usage. The concept of conversational style is a more useful explanation. Women appeared to show more characteristics of a high-involvement style when in conversation with other women than when in conversation with their husbands. (MSE)

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# Tag questions and gender in Swedish conversations

I have been working on a corpus of private conversations in Swedish recorded in Gothenburg, Sweden. In order to make apparent possible gender differences, as manifested in linguistic variables, I have compared language used in conversations between single-gender dyads - i.e. between either two men or two women, which I call MEN and WOMEN repectively - with the language used in two-gender dyads - i.e. conversations between a woman and a man, which I call MARRIAGES.

The informants were chosen by random selection. Men and women of two age groups, either around 25 or around 50 years, and of different social classes were asked to choose a friend or relative and talk together for about half an hour. The topics of conversation were freely chosen, and the informants made the recordings of the conversation themselves. My material amounts to 18 conversations, 6 from each group: MEN, WOMEN and MARRIAGES, comprising about 86 700 words fairly equally distributed among the groups.

Table 1. Differences between the three main groups

| | MEN | WOMEN | MARRIAGES | | TOTAL (N) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of words | 20,268 | 28,048 | 29,362 | | 86,678 |
| utterances | 2,371 | 3,427 | 2,602 | | 8,400 |
| turns | 2,223 | 3,089 | 2,437 | | 7,785 |
| TAGs all kinds | 95 | 165 | 90 | Male 32<br>Fem 58 | 350 |
| | 4.3% | 5.3% | 3.6% | | 4.5% |
| *va* 'right/OK?' | 51 | 71 | 53 | Male 21<br>Fem 32 | 175 |
| | 2.3% | 2.1% | 2.0% | | 2.2% |
| *vet du* 'you know' | 25 | 78 | 9 | Male 7<br>Fem 2 | 112 |
| | 1% | 2.5% | 0.4% | | 1.4% |

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| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Questions | 277 | 378 | 347 | Male 141<br>Fem 206 | 1,002 |
| | 12.4% | 12.2% | 14% | | 12.9% |

In this paper, I discuss the classic issue of tag-questions and gender. (Lakoff 1975, and others). Swedish differs from English with regard to the construction of tag questions, but although there are more restrictions on Swedish tags than on English ones, there are apparent similarities in function.

In my material 350 out of the total of 7.785 turns end with some kind of tag (4.5%).

These tags are roughly of two types: **interrogative tags** and **non-interrogative tags.** The interrogative tags are fairly evenly distributed between the three main groups, as opposed to the non-interrogative tags. The women use twice as many non-interrogative tags when talking to each other as men do in the single-gender groups. There are remarkably few expressions of this kind at all in MARRIAGES.

In order to be able to interpret these findings I picked out the most commonly used tag of each type, *va* ' right? isn't it?' and *vet du* 'you know'. There are 175 occurrences of *va* in final turn position and 197 in medial position, 372 cases in all. As regards *vet du* 'you know' there is also an invariant *du vet* which can be placed initially in the turn. If we add upp all the occurrences of *vet du /du vet* in different positions the figure is the same as for *va*, 372.

For detailed analyses I have picked out the sentences where *va* and *vet du/du vet* occur in final turn position, 175 and 112 cases respectively. I have listened to the tapes twice and roughly noted down intonation and pauses and tried to analyse the type of clause/speech act in which the tag occurs. (The conversations were also fully transcribed in a rough notation.)

*VA* 'right? isn't it?'

Syntactic qualities

*Va* is placed both in medial and final turn position. It is followed by speaker shift in 47% of the cases. It is almost always placed at a Transition Relevance Place (Levinson 1983). The intonation can be either falling or not falling in both positions. It is difficult to make sharp distinctions between different tones as *va* has no intonation of its own, but is included in the whole contour of the clause. I have not been able to draw any conclusions about the intonation

of *va*. (More elaborate work would be necessary. See also Näsllin 1984,135 about the complications as regards intonation in English tag questions). Often, the word preceding *va* is stressed. There are pauses before and after *va*.

Functions

Primarily *va* has a dialogical function (Hellberg 1985,56). It can be used by the addressee when he hasn't heard, or as an expression of surprise: ' you don't say'. In these cases it is a turn of its own like the English What? or What!

When *va* is used within the speaker's turn on the other hand, it functions at a general level as a device for eliciting a response from the addressee. But it has other functions, too. In my material I have classified *va* according to three main functions:

I. The speaker appeals to the addressee to verify the truth of the proposition, and *va* is tagged to a declarative. It could be paraphrased as 'is it true that?':

A: -- but you've made this yourself haven't you

B. yes there is bitter orange peel in it

II. The speaker checks the addressee's attention. The tag *va* has lost its main interrogative function. The tone on *va* is often falling and *va* is often overused. *Va* refers to the speech act itself and can be paraphrased as 'are you listening? /you are listening aren't you?'.

A: (is telling B about a film she has seen) it is about two girls who live fairly near each other that is they are friends nothing else right

B: mm

A: and they are a little artistic right one is a writer and the other is a photographer

B: yes

A: and then --- suddenly she tells the photographer right that she has met a guy who she believes well she is in love with right

The addressee gives the speaker the right to keep the turn, and in this function *va* is primarily a turnkeeper.

III. The speaker appeals for the agreement of addressee. The speaker is not unsure of the truth of the proposition concerned, and he takes it for granted that the hearer shares his views.

He wants the addressee's agreement, and disagreement is dispreferred second. (Levinson 1983). *Va* could be paraphrased 'you do agree, don't you?' in this case:

A: getting up at four o'clock in the morninng every day, nobody could stand that could they

B: certainly not

---

A: (about marriage) it is strange it is getting better and better isn't it

B: oh it is nice that somebody says so or that you hear that right for sometimes you go nuts when you hear all this about lots of divorces don't you

A: yes I agree

I think there is a certain correspondence between this tag and the English tag with a falling intonation wich acts as a means of evoking agreement (Quirk et al 1985, J Holmes 1984).

In my material I have applied Labov and Fanshel's categorisation of A- B- AB- O- and D-events and responses to the different types of clauses tagged by *va*. (Labov & Fanshel 1977). As is seen from my examples, in I the addressee should confirm or deny the truth of the speaker's proposition. B knows the answer to the question at hand, and thus we have here a B-event. According to the **rule of confirmation** (1977,100), B should confirm or deny the proposition which is done in my example.

In II A is telling B about her experiences. These are A-events as only A can have knowledge of their truth. B:s task is to show that she is listening. Labov and Fanshel give minimal acknowledgements as answers. In my example above we have mm and yes.

In III A wants agreement from B and is expecting this on the basis of their mutual experience, common ground. This can be classified as AB-events. Labov and Fanshel characterize AB-events as similar to areas of agreement (p102), and I consider them equal to pragmatic presuppositions. They are propositions about which there is general agreement. (Stubbs 1983,119).

It seems that a proposition which comprises an evaluation often demands more than a minimal response as an answer (Cf above "certainly not").

*Va* can also be preceeded by a proper exclamative. According to Brown and Levinson (1978,108,109) exclamatives can be used as positive politeness strategies. The speaker exaggerates his mutual interests with the hearer by using intensive expressions and thus claiming common ground. This can also be applied to my examples.

Futhermore, *va* can be tagged to requests. Requests are particularly face-threatening. In my examples *va* usually co-occurs with other expressions of modality:

A: Eivor is going to have a party on Good Friday

B: yes you said so yesterday

A: then we'll almost have to go, won't we

There is also a *va* tagged to a response. It is similar to the English **responsive** (Quirk et al) or **prodding tag** (Holmes):

A: yes but it is expensive

B: it is isn't it

A: yes

I interpret the use of this *va* as a positive politeness strategy as well.

Repeating the words of the preceding speaker can have a function of strengthening the solidarity between the speakers, (Brown-Levinson 1987:112).

The use of *va* with an exclamative, a request or in a response could also be characterized as AB-events as they strengthen solidarity and modify threats. They are oriented towards the addressee like the English tags that Janet Holmes calls **affective tags** ( 1984).

If we look at the distribution of the three main categories of *va* in my material we get the following table:

Table 2. Va 'right/OK?' in final turn position

| | I 'is it true that?' B-event | II 'are you listening?' A-event | III 'you agree don't you?' AB-event | (N) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| MEN | 17 | 15 | 19 | 51 |
| WOMEN | 27 | 22 | 22 | 71 |
| MARRIAGES | 18 { Male 9 / Fem 9 } | 27 { Male 8 / Fem 19 } | 8 { Male 4 / Fem 4 } | 53 { Male 21 / Fem 32 } |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total | 62 | 64 | 49 | 175 |

The tag most commonly used is the type where the speaker is checking the listener's attention. It is closely followed by the one where mainly the truth of the proposition is to be verified. The third type which is used in a context of solidarity is more unusual. It is particularly infrequently used in MARRIAGES. I shall return to this shortly.

*VET DU* 'you know'.

Let me first say someting about the other tag that I have analysed in graeater detail, *vet du* 'you know'.

Like its English counterpart *vet du* can function as a hedge, topic shifter, prestarter, staller and so on (Erman 1987). I think, however, that the main function of the Swedish *vet du* is to extend the common ground of the conversation and create intimacy between the speakers. Here there are some similarities with *va*. But there is originally an element of question in *va* which there is not in *vet du*. More important though is that , I believe, *vet du* presupposes old information which *va* does not do.

Syntactic qualities

Syntactically, *vet du* 'you know' is used in medial as well as in final turn position. There is an invariant *du vet* which is mainly used initially. Like *va*, *vet du* is almost always placed at a Transition Relevance Place in my material. Speaker shift occurs in 36% of the cases.

Unlike the English 'you know' the Swedish *vet du* never has a rising intonation and cannot be preceeded by a pause. *Vet du* can function in speaker shift, owing to its position at a Transition Relevance Place, but there is no interrogative marker on the expression itself eliciting a response. *Vet du* is a declarative and the main clause wich it is tagged on to can be regarded as an object of *vet du*. *Vet du* can be paraphrased 'as you know'.

Functions

*Vet du* is used with AB-events. The truth of the proposition is presupposed and so there is no new information in contexts where *vet du* is used. The addressee does not raise any objections. However, it also seems to me that *vet du* can be used in the context of an A-event

that the speaker wants to look like an AB-event. In this way there is an element of persuasion in *vet du:*

A: (about Transcendental Meditation): I can't understand that he can be taken in by that

B: well but you know young people who are on the look out.....for I mean I think he is so sensible when he talks you know

In this example B wants A to share her opinions about her son and she also wants to ward off A:s strong criticism of him.

*Vet du* 'you know' is used to strengthen the solidarity between the speakers since it is presupposed that they share common ground. It is used both in positive and negative politeness strategies. The speaker lowers the degree of formality, and consequently the status of the addressee is raised. The use of *vet du* creates intimacy.

*Vet du* 'you know' can be overused in narration - like *va* - and then its main function seems to be to act as a staller and turn-shifter. It often co-occurs with other vernacular expressions of low prestige. Overuse of *vet du* is stigmatized in Swedish as is overuse of *va*. With regard to the latter, any use of it has been stigmatized in the past, but it is now becoming more accepted.

*Vet du* is mainly used after statements in my corpus, but it can also be tagged to an exclamative.

Gender differences

Now I should like to turn to the distribution of the tags *va* and *vet du* in final turn position in the three main groups of dialogues: MEN, WOMEN and MARRIAGES.

As we see from table 1 WOMEN have the largest number of turns ending in different tags both when talking to each other and to their husbands (Significance p<. 02). The tags are of different kinds, however, and have different functions. If we look at the distribution of interrogative and non-interrogative tags the pattern is different. WOMEN have the greatest number of turns ending in non-interrogative tags - 2,9% of their turns end with those tags- *vet du, ser du, ju* which correspond to English 'you know' and invariants of that. When talking to their husbands, however, wives use fewer non-interrogative tags than their spouses. The most

remarkable thing about MARRIAGES though, is the low total figure. Of all the turns 0.5 % only end with these tags.

Neither is there any difference in the number of interrogative tags used in the single-gender groups. For the married couples, the number of turns ending with interrogative tags is slightly higher than in the single-gender groups. Here it is the wives who have more than double the number of tags used by their husbands. If we pick out *va* and *vet du* in final turn position as well as in medial position, the tendencies are the same.

How should these results be interpreted? Firstly, as I have claimed in this paper, the main function of *vet du* 'you know' is to create solidarity and initimacy between the two interlocutors. The result that the women use almost three times as many *vet du* as the men when talking to each other in my corpus could strengthen the hypothesis that women build up their conversational strategies more in terms of solidarity than men (Coates 1986). In my corpus, the women also use a much larger number of back-channeling signals when talking to each other than the men. The women's back-channeling signals are also of a more enthusiastic and supportive nature than the men's. The atmosphere in the WOMEN's dialogues is friendly, whereas in the MEN's dialogues there are certain elements of competition. (Nordenstam 1987, 1990 and forthcoming).

The very low number of *vet du* 'you know' in MARRIAGES is striking. The spouses do not seem to collaborate well when talking to each other. They are not particularly cooperative: often one of them talks about one topic and the other about another topic, the husbands yawn etc (Nordenstam 1990 & forthcoming). It seems characteristic that in one case where the spouses more or less quarrel all the time, there is only one instance of a non-interrogative tag while there are 41 interrogative tags of various kinds.

As for *va* 'right?' in final position there is no difference in the distribution between MEN when talking to each other and WOMEN in single sex groups. In both cases just over 2% of the turns end by those tags. In married couples though, tags ending in *va* are unequally distributed. Wives end 2.6% of their turns with *va* and husbands 1.7%.

We can compare the distribution of turns ending with *va* with turns consisting of or ending in questions. As for the latter there is no difference between the number used by MEN

and WOMEN in single-gender groups. They comprise 12.4% and 12.2% of all turns respectively. In the MARRIAGES though, a greater number of questions are used - 14% - and they are unequally distributed. 15.7% of the wives' turns end with questions, whereas only 11.4% of the husbands' are questions. I attribute the wives' greater tendency to ask questions to their sense of greater responsibility in promoting conversation. Pamela Fishman worded this phenomenon: "interaction the work women do" (1978). Wives take responsibility for conversation at home, and one device they use is asking questions.

Let's look at the distribution of the tag *va* again. In MARRIAGES more wives use *va* than husbands. As is clear from table 2, it is in the function of checking the listener's attention that *va* is unevenly used. This tallies well with the idea of women as responsible for interaction as mentioned above. It is also interesting that in Janet Holmes' classification of English tag questions, she found that women used more tags as facilitators of conversation than did men, a finding which corresponds to mine here.

On the other hand, there are only few cases of *va* in the context of appealing for agreement in MARRIAGES, (and the few there are are equally distributed among the spouses). This agrees with the findings concerning *vet du* which is not often used in MARRIAGES. Elsewhere, I have also found that the wives in my corpus talk more and take more initiatives in finding new topics of conversation (Nordenstam 1987 and forthcoming). I attribute these findings to the wives' taking greater responsibility for the conversation and the task of recording the conversation than the husbands.

Conclusions

We have found that *va* 'right? isn't it?' and *vet du/du vet* 'you know' have different functions in conversation, and that they are used in different conversational strategies. Their usage can never be explained out of context. I don't think that a single variable like tag questions can be seen in isolation as an explanation of gender differences in language usage. For my corpus I believe the concept of 'conversational style' as used by Deborah Tannen is fruitful (1984). When the women in my corpus talk to women friends they seem to be more relaxed and use more of the characteristics of **high-involvement style** than do wives when talking to their husbands.

There are difficulties in generalizing my findings, of course. The corpus is small, it is not the same people who talk to their same-sex friends and to their spouses etc. Still, I think it is important to analyse the conversation of single-gender groups as so little has been done. I also think that if we are going to try and find what is characteristic of female conversation we should look at women talking to other women. We know from psychologists and sociologists that girls and women organize themselves differently in single-gender groups than do men (Goodwin 1988). This is probably also manifested linguistically.

In conversation in mixed gender groups, women are not always powerless, nor are tag questions devices only used by the powerless, as has been assumed by some scholars (O'Barr & Atkins 1980 etc). It seems to me that the stereotype of women as powerless, not serious etc has been unfairly transferred to the usage of tags. In casual conversation, where the roles of the speakers are less strict than in more formal conversation, other functions can be found. Among these is the role of facilitator of conversation, which I believe often is a role of leadership. It seems women more often take this role than men. This is also manifested in language usage, and among the devices used are tag questions.

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